

Elizabeth Saunders

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[0 : 0 0] Well thank you again for having me here this morning. It's wonderful as I said to be able to speak about a woman from history and actually particularly a woman from history who most people don't know about. It's something I'm really passionate about telling some stories of some unknown women and when Steve asked me to speak about a woman from history steadfast in faith I immediately thought of Elizabeth Saunders. Now as I said she is a relatively unknown person from the early history of the New South Wales Baptists. Now the reason why I chose her was not because of my connections with the Baptist churches although I do think Baptist history is pretty interesting but it was really because of the multiple ways in which her life displayed the steadfast love, steadfast faithfulness of God. What I have in mind by that is partly the way in which at various points in her life story she showed steadfast faithful love toward God and others but also and perhaps even more so the ways in which she herself and her family experienced

God's steadfast love and kindness in their own lives. One of my favourite words from the Old Testament is the Hebrew word hesed. It's the word that's sometimes translated as steadfast love.

Especially in situations where the person demonstrating it is in a covenant relationship with another person and is steadfastly faithfully keeping that covenant of love. So it's the word that's used over and over again to describe the steadfast love of God himself toward his people.

But it also gets used in situations where the love and mercy that's been shown spills over beyond any covenant responsibilities. It exists where there isn't any covenant relationship at all in some cases and for that reason in some translations like the NIV it's frequently translated not as steadfast love but as mercy or kindness. And for most of this talk as we reflect together on the story of Elizabeth Saunders it's that word kindness that I'll be using. And as I tell her story I want us to be listening for some of the echoes that we will hear of one of the great Old Testament stories of hesed of steadfast love and kindness. The story that we read in the Old Testament book of Ruth and we just heard the first chapter of that read just before quite beautifully. You might want to go and read the rest of it this afternoon. It's a short book and if you're already familiar with it you might see the connections as I speak about Elizabeth Saunders's life today. I think there are a lot of parallels.

Twice exiled, vulnerable, widowed, living out the kindness and steadfast love of God in ways that were costly and controversial at times. Her life really does remind me in multiple ways of Ruth and Naomi's story. And that should not really be a surprise because the same kind and gracious God that they worshipped was her God too. Elizabeth Saunders was born in England in 1801 and grew up in Aberdeen in the north of Scotland. There's a picture of the place there. Her father was stationed as a lieutenant with the Navy. She married her husband John in May 1834 after meeting him when he was in Edinburgh training to be a Baptist missionary. Both had become strongly evangelical in their convictions during their formative years.

[4 : 22] John had made the decision to follow Christ in the aftermath of his mother's death when he was still a teenager. He left his family's congregational church and was baptised at Cold Harbour Lane Baptist Church or Denmark Place Baptist Church in Camberwell in London. His family had set their hearts in entering Parliament and he trained as a solicitor before leaving, becoming a Baptist pastor and starting to pursue the idea of overseas missionary work. Elizabeth's faith was also strongly evangelical. She was probably influenced by an evangelical revival in Scotland led by a man named Robert and James Holden in the early 19th century.

And she was attending one of the congregational churches they had planted in Edinburgh and that's where she and John married. And this was a time when evangelicals were deeply concerned for the spread of the gospel into all the world and they were involved in a host of charitable causes. Lots of causes aimed at promoting justice and mercy. This was true for John and Elizabeth as well. So Elizabeth had been involved in various acts of service. She was an active member of a philanthropic group called the British Lady Society for promoting the reformation of female prisoners. They didn't go for short titles but did what it said. That was what they were interested in. And that was a group organised by Elizabeth Fry who's a more well-known person in history. A Quaker who was famous for her philanthropy and concerned for prison reform. And as a volunteer with that society, Elizabeth Saunders regularly visited Newgate Prison in London and that had notoriously bad living conditions for women and children. So volunteers like Elizabeth would bring in provisions like food and clothes and teach the women basic skills like needlework. They established a school for children who were living in prison with their mothers and lobbied the government for an improvement in the conditions for women in prisons throughout the country. And they also visited convict women who were being held in prison hulks on the Thames waiting to be transported to Australia.

So for the first few months of their marriage, John served as a pastor in a Baptist church in Shacklewell in London. But he was deep in conversation with the Baptist Missionary Society. He actually wanted to be sent to India. But it wasn't long before someone else came to him and said, look, there's a Baptist congregation in Sydney that's just lost its pastor. It's just been planted and it doesn't, yeah, this is congregation. We need you. So just a few months into the marriage, Elizabeth and John boarded a female convict ship called the George Hibbert. They did this actually without financial support since New South Wales was not technically a missionary destination. So they weren't sent as missionaries. So they had to find other ways to get out to Australia. And Elizabeth Fry had pleaded earnestly with the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, to send Elizabeth Saunders as a matron to the convicts on this ship. This was the first time such a request was made. Usually they were sent out with any sort of care in that respect. And it's the first time it was granted and it meant that Elizabeth could go out as the matron to these female convicts and they could have free passage. John was also the chaplain to the female convicts. So this was their way to get to Australia. Now, it wasn't an easy journey. It was a long journey. It was arduous. Elizabeth actually battled severe seasickness. For most of the journey, she lost a worrying amount of weight. And on the same journey out, many others have come to dysentery and they died on their way out to Australia. John painted a vivid picture of the voyage in a letter home to his sister. There's a quote here, the rolling and pitching of the ship, the delay and heat during calms, the perilous position during gales, the cluck of the women during the day, the howling of the wind over a waste of waters during the night. Now added to those, then we may mention seasickness and cockroaches. And to these, the pleasure of often having part of your dinner in your lap before it got to your mouth. When Elizabeth became ill with seasickness, John actually performed the duties of chaplain and schoolmaster and some of her duties as well. And he started school lessons for the women and children on deck every morning, formed two Bible classes for the women and conducted two churches services on Sundays. And the ship's captain actually wrote about both of them later on. He remembered that many of the convict women weren't able to read and write when they boarded the ship. But by the end of the journey, after being taught by John, they could do both. And he also spoke positively about Elizabeth saying that she was very attentive and kind to these women. The Saunders' work, even on their journey to the colony, was rated a huge success by people like Elizabeth Fry. She looked back on their efforts saying, surely the result of our labours has hitherto been beyond our most sanguine expectations as to the improved state of our prisons, female convict ships and the convicts in New South Wales.

So they arrived in Australia, but when they arrived in Sydney, things were even harder than the ship journey. Elizabeth described the colony as a wilderness, like being in complete exile.

She struggled with the climate in Sydney and the vast array of vermin and bugs. She particularly hated the mosquitoes. In another letter home, John described their comical bedtime routine, which involved Elizabeth hopping into bed with the mosquito curtains drawn, with John on the outside with the candle, and Elizabeth smashing as many as were visible. Her fear of mosquitoes was so great that she would supplement the mosquito nets by sleeping with gloves and her head covered.

[11:15] Arriving in summer in Sydney was also a huge shock to her, coming from England. She continued to struggle with her health, telling her sister that her limbs were extremely weak and she didn't expect to gain much strength while the weather remained so hot.

On arriving in Sydney, Elizabeth was also shocked by the realities of living in a penal colony. At this stage, convicts and ex-convicts meet up over a third of the population.

They had a female convict living with them as a servant that they'd met on the way out. And Elizabeth and John maintained contact with this Society for Female Prisoners, sending back reports about various female convicts that the women back home in England were interested in and concerned for, and particularly those who had already come to faith.

But as much as Elizabeth was interested in this cause and accustomed to poverty and the plight of prisoners and their families, she still found the constant presence of convicts in chains unsettling and disturbing.

She could hear prisoners passing by on the streets of Sydney, clanking their chains, and she found the sound awful and heart-wrenching, she said. She would wonder if they were bush rangers or whether they would soon be executed.

[12 : 39] She commented that the conditions of the female convicts in Sydney were worse than she had seen in Newgate Prison on her visits there. Her quote was, You never beheld woman so degraded as she appears in Sydney streets.

Nothing really about their lives in Sydney during those early months seemed comfortable or easy or familiar compared to the life that they'd left behind in London.

This was not a choice that they would have made if they were looking for their happiness in the comfort and the safety of their familiar world or in the possessions that they could amass.

But they knew deep down that this was a choice that they were compelled to make, that they were clear about why they had made it. Reflecting on some of the daily difficulties they were encountering, just a few months after their arrival, John reassured his brother in a letter home that, I am happy and so is Elizabeth.

For we came out for an object and God favours us. But we put up with some things we should have no occasion to contend with at home. I write not to complain, he said in another letter written a few weeks later, for a kind God has made us and still keeps us happy.

[14 : 05] But to convince you how much his support and consolations can make every situation comfortable. But the way in which Elizabeth Saunders and her husband lived out the kindness of God went far beyond the discomforts and inconveniences that they endured.

There was also frequently a sharp and risky edge of controversy to the kindness that they showed. And numerous occasions when they took choices that put their reputation and respectability at risk.

And at a time in which reputation and respectability was everything, this was no small thing. The risk to reputation was there from the very beginning.

The original Baptist pastor in Sydney, John McCaig, had been a figure of public ridicule and scorn. When he baptised his first converts in Woolloomooloo Bay, a crowd of cheering onlookers gathered around to hoot and laugh at him, throw stones while he was trying to baptise, and then they stole his shoes at the end of it.

And things only got worse from there as his ministry unravelled, his life spiralled down into miserable drunkenness, gambling addiction, debtors prison, and attempted suicide.

[15 : 31] So that was the state of things when John was asked to come. So throwing in lot in with the Baptists in the 1830s was not a decision to join with the beautiful people.

And the causes that her husband John threw himself into, alongside the work of pastoring, the Bathurst Street Baptist Church, and helping to plant a string of other ones, were frequently controversial and disreputable as well.

The cause that John was best known for in his own time was his involvement in the temperance movement, a movement that sprang up in the 1830s and 1840s in response to a growing concern at the social harm caused by excessive consumption of alcohol, particularly drinks like gin and rum.

Now, Elizabeth shared John's opinions about the effects of the rum trade on the colony. She was shocked at the level of street violence and public drunkenness in Sydney, writing home about it on multiple occasions.

And the temperance campaign also was a joint effort between them. So John and Elizabeth did this together when she travelled with him, for example, when he made his first trip out of Sydney in 1835.

[16 : 50] He went and established temperance societies in country outposts like Campbelltown and Liverpool. Which were just tiny little towns at the time.

And, yeah, that was a big journey, actually. And it was a big deal because it was at a time when temperance campaigners were finding it desperately hard to persuade the women of the colony to give their support to the cause because it was seen as being a cause.

It was not respectable. It was not a good issue for ladies to involve themselves in. Over time, the work of Saunders as a leader of the temperance movement ended up winning him enormous respect and recognition.

Public figures like Governor Gipps and the Attorney General John Plunkett were full of praise for him, even if there were other people less than impressed. But he was also outspoken on issues that were less popular at the time.

And the most famous of these was the way that he responded to the Mile Creek Massacre in 1838 when 28 Indigenous people were rounded up and slaughtered by stockmen at a property near Mile Creek in northwestern New South Wales.

[18 : 06] This was not the first time that large-scale killings of Indigenous people had taken place in New South Wales. But it was the first time that the perpetrators were held to account and charged with murder.

In October, as the men were being tried, Saunders preached a sermon which caused a massive backlash in the press. The text of the sermon was Isaiah 26, 21.

Behold, the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. The earth shall disclose her blood and shall no more cover her slain.

And its climax was on the collective guilt of the whole colony for the shedding of innocent blood. More than that, he went on to set the massacre in the even larger context of the wrongs that had been done in invading the continent, stealing the land, and destroying communities by introducing a whole new set of European vices and addictions.

Now, this was far beyond what almost anyone else was prepared to say at a time when even the decision to prosecute the perpetrators of the massacre was viewed as a controversial one.

[19 : 28] And the sermon and a follow-up speech he gave a few days later led to enormous controversy. There were threats of legal action, vicious public criticism, so particularly from the editor of the City Morning Herald.

He attacked Saunders in a series of furious editorials accusing him of malicious falsehood and maniacal fury before going on to say, let him keep to his pulpit and attend to the narrow circle of his own congregation.

For should he persist in assuming such airs of importance as he has lately assumed in denouncing and libeling the colonists, he may rest assured that we will drive him back to his proper position in society.

Now, this could hardly have been a comfortable time for Elizabeth as she watched her husband stick his neck out repeatedly for a cause that he believed in, knowing that he would end up himself attacked so violently and relentlessly in response.

John and Elizabeth's marriage was clearly the kind of relationship in which they travelled side by side and talked things through together. In the letters that they wrote back home, they frequently echo one another's thoughts.

[20 : 45] And John repeatedly mentions ways in which his prudent wife had advised him on various issues. On this issue, however, it seems that prudence, as they understood it, did not stand in the way of doing what was right and just, motivated by compassion and kindness and driven by conviction by the word of God.

Now, the kindness that Elizabeth and John showed to others in Sydney was deeply costly.

It affected them emotionally and it affected them physically as well. Elizabeth married relatively late at the age of 34 and struggled to have children.

They waited a long time before they welcomed a baby into their family. And finally, when the time came, their baby boy, Edmund, was stillborn.

Now, who knows how things would have worked out if they'd stayed back in London and had the better medical care that would have been available to them back there. But it must have been a terrible time.

[21 : 58] Her sister came out the following year to join them. Her name was Sarah. And it was just in time to help Elizabeth through labour a second time.

And this time, she gave birth to a healthy little girl whom they named Elizabeth or Bessie. By this time, Elizabeth Saunders was in her 40s and this would be their only living child.

The time in Sydney also affected John's health. John worked hard. The sheer number of societies he was involved in running would have added up to a really heavy workload, especially his role in the temperance society.

And if you add to this the burden of pastoring a church, which was in the initial stages of being established and overseeing a major building project, he must have been constantly on the edge of exhaustion.

His letters home in the first year indicate that he always struggled with his health even from the very beginning. Over his 13 years in Sydney, it became even worse. It seems that no diagnosis was ever made.

[23 : 09] But most people who knew him seemed to agree that whatever the complaint was, the excessive zeal in his labours of usefulness, is the quote, his excessive zeal certainly exacerbated it.

And by 1847, it was decided he would need to go back home to England. And after a large farewell, the family, Elizabeth, John, Bessie, their daughter, and Elizabeth's sister, Sarah, all sailed out from Sydney in January 1848.

After returning to England, they settled back in London. John worked for some time as a solicitor and officiated as a past congregation in the suburbs.

His health continued to decline and while he tried to conduct occasional religious services, he ended up unable to do anything. Elizabeth described him as being incapacitated by utter prostration.

And he died in 1857. Up until his last weeks, he was still hoping to return to Australia, wanting to at least be put to rest in what he called that bright land.

[24 : 22] The knowledge that he would never return was, as Elizabeth described it, his death blow. His gravestone in England expressed the extent to which his time in Australia was the most significant of his life.

It said, this memorial is erected by his widow, sister, and child, and may perhaps guide some old Australian friend to the last resting place of one whose energies were devoted to the best interests of that bright land.

Now, John's death left Elizabeth destitute. The evening before the funeral, John's law firm partner sat her down and informed her that there were no funds left, not even enough to pay the funeral expenses.

She lamented that, kind and generous as he was to others, he had not been able to save anything for his family and said that, I felt stupefied and horror-stricken, and what to do I knew not, nor do I now.

Now, the poor law in Victorian England was a fragile and rickety safety net, and there was a very real possibility she would end up with no home and no means of support.

[25 : 44] Her only option was to cast herself on the kindness of others. So she asked some influential friends in Sydney if they would consider raising a small subscription for her.

May the law direct our kind friends in Sydney, she said. I put my cause in their hands, the cause of the fatherless and the widow. There was an overwhelming response.

Her letter was published in multiple Sydney newspapers, and an enormous amount was raised in response to her appeal. Despite the fact they'd been gone for 11 years, the Saunders family had not been forgotten.

Over 200 donations were made, adding up to over £650 in total. Now, that was a lot of money at the time when a house made would earn about £21 a year.

Overwhelmed by this kindness, Elizabeth returned to Australia. The following year, she came with her daughter, Bessie, and her sister, Sarah. And the three women started a small school in Pitt Street, Redfern.

[26 : 54] It's pictured there and some terraces in Pitt Street. Elizabeth's daughter, Bessie, ended up a good deal wealthier than her mother.

In 1868, she married Arthur Rennick, whom she met through the Redfern Congregational Church. Arthur went on to become a doctor and member of parliament.

He was knighted and so she would later become known as Lady Elizabeth Rennick. But even in their wealth and respectability, the Rennicks carried with them something of the kindness that Bessie had seen modelled by her parents and the lessons that they had been taught, she'd been taught by them about the God who cares for widows and orphans.

Arthur, her husband, was responsible for introducing the old age pension in New South Wales. He also introduced legislation that outlawed commercial baby farming and protected the right of women to keep their children if they were widowed or deserted.

They were both prominent supporters of the Benevolent Society and a host of other charitable institutions, particularly those which helped women and children. Bessie continued to care for her mother Elizabeth and her aunt Sarah until their deaths.

[28 : 16] Elizabeth died in 1878 in their home near Hyde Park in Sydney. Sarah continued to live with them and died ten years later in 1888.

All three women are buried in the same plot at Rookwood Cemetery. You can still go and visit today. A few months after he arrived in the colony, John Saunders wrote home to his sister.

You may think religion a hard service when it calls a man to leave his home, his country and his friends. So far from it. I can truly say my joys have been more regular, tranquil and intense than in a secular occupation and that with some little trials I have had greater consolations.

Our family is much tried but God will out of this I trust adduce some excellence of character. May his glorious hand transmute our sordid metal to lustrous gold wear.

Happy here and under the kind guardianship of our heavenly father, I trust you will be blessed at home. Pray the spirit of truth be with you. May the same spirit of truth be with us and the same kind guardianship of our heavenly father watch over our ways and may we know the same joy in his service.

[29 : 41] Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for the life of Elizabeth Saunders. We thank you for her faithfulness to you and we thank you for the way that your steadfast love and kindness was so just clearly demonstrated in her life.

We thank you that you also care for us in the same way you show us the same faithfulness and kindness day by day.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.